



Distractions

it's something else

presents

Once Upon a QWERTY

eric hill

It was different in those days, you understand? Fredericton, Spring '95. You could hear the air creaking with the sounds of red pens grinding over essays and exams; wallets

and purses, nearly empty, gaping open in bars full of celebration, bars full of regret.

Spring '95. I was just a crazy kid with a dream. Just another wise guy with a creative writing degree, too much time and not enough money. I had spent ten years in the 'hood and seen others drift in, write

their books, drift out... just a few letters about jobs dismantling dangerous chickens then it was time for another batch of writers to drift in. Something had to be done. This was Fredericton, you understand? Cradle of literary history. Birthplace of writerly ideas. And I was the guy with a big 'ol 100 watt bulb over my noggin. But I needed help. I went to the only man I knew could make it happen. I went to the Don.

Don "Fiddlehead" McKay sat in his overstuffed

rocking chair, face as patient and familiar as the old country. He listened to the plans: a new journal, chapbooks, readings, a bumper car ride. I watched his eyes. They were far, far away. I knew he was in the past, back when he and Atwood and Ondaatje and Borson and Marlatt and that gang were all just crazy kids like us, starting out, getting kicks. His eyes focused on me and he said, "Soon this favour you ask of me will be done. But sometime in the future I may ask you to do something" Then the Don relit his cigar, pulled his field glasses out of a desk drawer and turned back to the window. I left, a little happy, a little afraid.

The summer of '95 passed. Slow and hot and humid as usual. People brought their children to play in parks with wading pools; some wore paper hats. Others didn't. Couples lingered too long in cafes then walked into the night leaving behind bad tips for good service. Runs melted human minds. Same as it ever was.

Fall '95. I got the call. The Don had come through: a bank account; a lease on literary life. Word circulated. We needed a few dedicated, hungry, creative types without personal lives to do this job. And we got 'em. There was the seven of us. Hard men with more guts than brains and the livers of Greek sailors. Calendars were consulted; maps drawn; letters written; manifestos manifested; drinks drank; arcane sacri-

fices and rituals performed. This was more than paper to us. This was our baby. Our QWERTY.

Nine months later, in a haze of cigars, champagne and backslapping (and, it has to be admitted, some unwarranted nudity) our bouncing sassy arts mag came into the world. The Don attended the launch and I spied him grin the enigmatic grin that enigmatic Dons sometimes grin in times of great success. It was Spring '96, Fredericton, you understand? And everything had changed.

Now it's Fall again. New writers have arrived. Crazy kids like we used to be. We wait for them at the airport and bus station. We've grown stronger; finally gotten women to join our circle; been granted support from those generous and longer established wise guys at the GSA. And we're expecting again. Another little QWERTY. We are so proud.

As for the Don? Well he went to take care of operations out west. I think about that favour I owe him sometimes, and early mornings when I hear the crows coughing in the trees outside my bedroom window, my eyes drift to the telephone.

How You Are

JASON HEROUX

As stubborn as toffee, a joy humming birds can taste: that's how you are, hurt how fields are hurt at the end of summer.

That's how you are: bees bump inside your veins and the wind holds the slack reins of your hair, Your limbs pour from bottle-mouths of bone into the bottomless throat that lives between my hands.

I have heard each heartbeat as it unbuttoned your blood—but one night a neighbour's guitar clasped me like you thighs, one night a kite tangled in the treetops had the same mild weeping as your vagina.

As stubborn as autumn, a joy that softens cinnamon leaves: but one night your tears cried inside the heart of an apple and one night your kneecap circled the earth.



Food For the Gods (excerpts)

JOHN WEBSTER

I taught an expurgated version of *Howl* to Junior College students for years although I never managed to get it onto the curriculum. And I actually met Allen Ginsberg once. We were on a raft in the middle of the South Pacific Ocean. I was doing a mixture of methamphetamine and cooked-down paregoric in those days but he was a perfect gentleman. We shared a vegetarian paté and did nothing but talk for weeks. A mutual friend told me later that Allen remembers it all perfectly.

Is this true or what? The air is poison and the water they make us drink is nothing you'd ever want to feed your kids. You told me once that the majority of dolphins killed in tuna nets are females and infants. I've never actually seen a dolphin or a tuna net but I feel your pain.

What I am beginning to understand is that there are hungers beyond hunger, motives beyond motive, drives beyond drive; the farmer in the dell burns off chickens' beaks so they won't peck each other to death so often when they go insane in the small wired cages they find themselves in because he has a wife and a mortgage and three sweet children he loves more than the outraged howl of heaven itself.

Science has identified one hundred and forty-seven rhinoviruses. Have you ever seen a virus? Neither have I, but I can imagine.

Especially when it comes to something he wants to eat...
Man has an infinite capacity to rationalize his rapacity
— Amory Cleveland

Perdita confuses me. She has entered my room with a nutritional drink composed almost entirely of chemicals. She approaches me shyly, with reverence, and yet she insists on speaking in baby-talk. My mind is still cloudy from a dream of rooftops and I know, now, that Mr. Piirro is from my childhood.

Perdita is of Spanish-American descent and, in spite of her reticence, her free young breasts sing out (as they lean over me) from beneath her candy jumper. Their supplications fall on deaf ears, And how my friend Moloch smiles and farts and licks bloody lips as he paces, impatient, in his dark corner,

I make allowances. I've always felt that, with even a little more self-restraint, M... could have been a contender.

An alarmingly high percentage of household dust is composed of the sloughed-off dead skin from human body-parts. Did you know that?

Inland

BILL GASTON

He's a pig when it comes to rum, he hears her say to a crowd. He flees, drunk on the damn rum, trips, watches her from a floundering spot on the lawn.

The stars are out. That is, off. Navigation has ceased. She's steady on the patio, haloed by party-light. Smiling, she makes as if to slap a guy who makes as if to cringe, smiling. On the lawn he cringes truly, an island of pain in a green sea. He burps a loud bellow of rum and people turn to the noise, the one-man vaudeville honk-horn act there on the grass.

He starts to singing *Farewell to Nova Scotia the seabound coast*, to draw her to him, draw her out of that light. It was their song once, when they did leave that coast, when they left and came in to this more toss'd world. He needs her now. But he has sunk low, to earth, and he has burped, and she will not come.

They have suffered this evening before. Yet he feels her receding tonight, drifting out of reach. He knows she questions his legitimacy as a rum-comic. He wishes he were Malcolm Lowry, or Ondaatje's father perhaps, decanting vanilla extract into a gold-rimmed snifter with the family's blessings. To be blessed is to be freed from the nets of judgement.

Now a lurching sailor's run for the bushes. His moans in the fog. No one aids. This wet shirt front he wants to explain is not rum, not vomit, not yet. In the corners of their eyes he sees his face reflected, his storming bad cheer.

His toe hooks a tomato cage and he is bellydown in the garden, recognizing what are beet stems. Tropically purple an inch from his face. Hands confirm this vegetable by molesting a small breast of beet mounding out of soil. He growls a pirate's joke into the dirt about flowerin' knockers that stem and leaf. What sort of bra..? What foreplay should..? Har.

He sees he is nearly asleep. He relaxes, warms the dirt from above, a broad, spreading love. He senses the rising worms.

How, how do worms stay wet?

All that is necessary, is.

But is all that is, necessary?

Garden spirits, like mists on his hot face, whisper: with right humour. You will be safe.

Excerpts from the Fall '96 issue of QWERTY reprinted with permission.

Ice House Press, Qwerty & a place that will remain nameless present

A Literary Evening
The Autumn '96 Launch of:

QWERTY!

With readings by
Kenneth J. Harvey
John Webster
& others

Sunday October 27, 7:30 at Picaroon's

There will be issues for sale & writers to talk to.
For more information, call 453-4686.

Ice House Press, Qwerty & others-who-will-remain-nameless-present:

SLAM! III

Join us in celebrating
the out-loudness of poetry
and the Autumn '96 issue of

QWERTY!

Saturday, November 2nd, 8 p.m. @ The Cellar

A panel of judges will determine who is the best poet under pressure which is to say who can write and present the most entertaining piece of artistic expression on an assigned topic in the time-limited bar environment dust off yer mases ladies & gentlemen

prizes
surprises
instant fame

Sign up sheets are available at the English Department